DR. HARBANS KAUR GILL - A VERSATILE WRITER

— Dr. D.P. Singh

A sensitive story teller, a dynamic administrator, an outstanding academician, an ardent nature lover and a dedicated social worker - these diverse talents combine to form the versatile genius that Dr. Harbans Kaur Gill is. Presently, she is the Assistant Director in the Punjab School Education Board, Mohali.

A prolific writer, Dr. Gill was awarded the 'National Award' for development of children's literature by NCERT in 1993, for her book titled *Panchhian Di Holi*. The book has been especially written for the children of 5-8 years age group.

From her earliest years, the creative urge within her found expression in literary pursuits. Her first article appeared in *Temperence* (a literary magazine published from Ludhiana), in 1966. Since then, she has come a long way. Her creative works in Punjabi number over twenty today. These include fifteen books for children, four books on literary criticism and one edited text-book for

senior secondary classes. An impressive tally by any yardstick.

Harbans Kaur was born and brought up in the village of Gahaur (Ludhiana). Her mother, Smt. Gurdial Kaur, a pious housewife, acquainted her with Punjabi culture and folklore. Her father, S. Mehar Singh, inspired in her a love for nature and encouraged her to study good books. The harmonious family atmosphere provided this lively and sensitive girl with a sense of optimism, self confidence and a strong will - an important cornerstone of her personality even now. She completed her graduation from Punjab University in 1967. After obtaining a B.Ed. degree, she started her professional career as a school teacher.

Her love for nature aroused in her the creative urge for writing. Working at Government Girls High School, Dakha, she started taking a keen interest in understanding the problems of children. She realised that though children were enthusiastic to know so many things, there was a dearth of children's literature to cater to their needs. Thereafter, she devoted herself to the cause of children's literature. It was this period of her life in which the seeds of her future writings were sown. Her efforts in the coming years bore fruit in the shape of fifteen books for children - an intermix of short stories and poems. She made Nature, with its varied manifestations, the central theme of her writings. In her books for children, she weaves her tales around birds, animals, seasons and festivals.

Her marriage to Dr. G.S. Gill (a renowned writer and critic) in 1971 strengthened her resolve to pursue the chosen path. The constant encouragement and inspiring guidance of her husband helped her to fashion her ideas in a much better way.

Despite her many engagements in the field of children's literature, she wanted to further increase her knowledge about it. She did her post graduation in Punjabi literature from Punjabi University, Patiala, in 1976 and topped the list of successful candidates.

In 1977, she joined the Punjab School Education Board as Assistant Director and till date she is serving the Board in various capacities such as writing lessons for Punjab Open School, preparing the text books for school children, editing and getting the syllabi of primary, middle, high and senior secondary classes.

Her unquenchable thirst for acquiring more and more knowledge, compelled her to complete her M. Phil. studies in 1978. Thereafter she enrolled herself as a researcher at Punjabi University, Patiala. In 1985, Harbans Kaur Gill was awarded a Ph.D. degree for her monumental work titled : *Puratan Punjabi Vartak Vich Lok-tat.* In her thesis, she has critically analysed the writings pertaining to medieval folklore in Punjabi literature. Later on, she obtained her M.Ed degree in 1989 as well.

She has presented her research work at various national and international conferences/seminars and has to her credit twenty five research articles and four research books. One of the books, *Jiwan Jandh* edited by her has been prescribed as a textbook for senior secondary classes. Her books are published by publishers of repute including Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab University Chandigarh, Punjab State University text-book Board, Chandigarh and Punjab School Education Board, Mohali.

Her award winning book, *Panchhian Di Holi* carries the message of national integration, secularism and amity through the characters of birds and animals. The book contains an illustrative story of birds and animals living harmoniously and celebrating various rituals and festivals like human beings in society.

Coming from typical rural Punjabi stock, she has certain rare qualities of the head and heart, a warm touch, graceful manners, sophistication, quick grasping power, transparent vision, single mindedness and sincerity of purpose.

Endowed with administrative acumen and with long experience in her specialization of formal and non-formal education techniques, she stands for excellence in education, education for weaker sections of society, and the spread of education in rural areas through a well-knit media of formal and non formal systems of education. Command-

ing a strong base among the educated elite of the state, she is for democratization of the education process, involving teachers, students and the community.

Relating to her educational commitment, over one hundred of her talks have been broadcast by A.I.R. Jalandhar. Also about forty of her programmes have been telecast by Jalandhar Doordarshan, with Dr. Gill acting either as an expert or a moderator. Recently, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India has nominated Dr. Gill as a member of the Educational Consultative Panel of AIR for three years.

Not only in literature, she has been a devoted soul in the field of social work as well. Her services were recognized for contributing money and clothes to the Punjab Flood Relief Fund in October, 1988, by Mrs. Maya Ray, the then First Lady of the State.

Since July 1993, she took over as the Incharge, Magazine Cell of the Punjab School Education Board and is also shouldering the responsibility of the Editorship of *Pankharian*. This magazine of the School Board has made rapid strides under her stewardship, and has emerged as a front-rank magazine in children's literature in Punjabi. As Incharge of Magazine cell with the overall responsibility of publication of its three magazines - *Pankharian, Primary Sikhia* and *School Education*, she does her duty with enthusiastic diligence - which has earned her the appreciation of one and all - contemporary writers, readers, her colleagues, her seniors, and especially children.

According to Dr. Gill, there is a scarcity of literature for children in our country, and it is more acute in Punjabi. There is a need to develop more reading material for children to inculcate good behaviour and to contribute their mental development. She plans to devote more time to produce reading material for children on the cultural heritage of Punjab.

She stresses the need for original writing, expressing permanent values which the children can imbibe. She disapproves of writing just for the sake of flaunting one's name in the academic/literary sphere. According to her, the creative urge should come from within oneself.

In her opinion, a good book for children should have short and simple sentences. It should awaken the imaginative power of the children and whatever information needs to be imparted should be presented in an interesting way, to capture the child's attention. Children's books should have a good number of bright and colourful illustrations with bold writing.

She wishes that the writers would select topics from Punjabi culture and folklore for writing children's books. She feels the need for the development of the book culture and scientific temper among school children. She recommends the use of audio/video media for imparting useful information to children. She is for making good books available to children at a low cost. In order to achieve this, she stresses the need for dedication among the writers, teachers, publishers and parents for this cause.

I write for children because I think they matter and because my gift happens to lie in writing stories for and about them. I cannot, for the life of me, see any reason why one would want NOT to write for children - unless, of course, one wasn't a good enough writer. Children are people still brave enough to dream. They are our heirs, our next-of-kin in the human family, our loved ones. I am proud to write for children. How lucky we are to write for people not yet blase, not yet cynical, not yet looking for instant gratification, not yet running in the rat race.

Jean Little